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Border Violence as Settler Nativism

Lia Incognita

July 26, 2014

The following article is adapted from Lia Incognita's speech for the Movement Beyond Borders public forum held on Wurundjeri land at the Victorian Trades Hall on Saturday 30 November 2013. The forum was organised by the Beyond Borders Collective, with speakers Kaneez Raza, Angela Mitropoulos, Dawood, Ruben Blake and Lia Incognita sharing their perspectives, followed by questions and discussion with the audience.

Asked to contemplate what a cross-border politics in Australia could look like today, I want to stress that for me, a movement *beyond borders* is not a movement of *no nations* or against nationhood. In fact one of the earliest interactions I had with the Beyond Borders Collective when it first formed was to question a photo on the Beyond Borders page at the time which showed a banner stating 'no borders, no nations'.

I believe supporting Indigenous sovereignty is essential to cross-border politics, and indeed no contradiction, if a cross-border politics understands that all people have the right to determine their law and the future of their land, though no nation

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has the right to refuse entry to vulnerable peoples. This is no contradiction unless the only way you can conceive of a country is as private property – which unfortunately seems to be not only a popular metaphor but the dominant interpretation driving government policy. As Lorenzo Veracini said recently in *Arena* magazine (No. 125, Aug/Sep 2013)

“global condemnation of Australia’s stance in 2001 was met with ‘No one can tell me what to do’, ‘Nobody understands us’, and ‘I didn’t do it’ responses (that is, they threw the children overboard). Furthermore, Australia had a Prime Minister who was extraordinarily in touch with public sentiment was speaking about entry to the country as if he was sixteen and talking about his room: ‘We will determine who comes to this country and under what circumstances’.”

We should not accept this metaphor, this myth that a nation is dependent on border policing, and that a country is analogous to private property.

Another question this panel was asked was *how can we break from the language that defines the discussion around borders now?* This is imperative because a lot of pro-refugee rhetoric doesn’t challenge the problematic ways the discussion has been framed by the right. We need to resist phrases like ‘genuine refugees’ or ‘economic migrants’ or ‘the lucky country’ when it has only ever been lucky for some. We need to resist language that feeds the lie of *terra nullius* by suggesting Australia is ‘young’, ‘free’ and full of empty space. We need to refuse to make these constant ongoing reassurances that only a small, manageable number of refugees will arrive, that they will be harmless and grateful and assimilate, that they will contribute labour and consumable diversity but nothing disconcerting or transformative. We need to reject this rhetoric not only because it legitimates a claims process that is traumatising,

invasive and victimising, but also because it legitimates the Australian government's right to decide.

The perceived threat of people crossing borders is only part of what motivates Australian policy, so assuaging this anxiety is only part of challenging border violence. Operation Sovereign Borders is very explicitly and obviously about the colonial state performing sovereignty, as are earlier iterations of border control. This tactic has been part of Australian history since the start of colonial occupation. The Colony of Victoria passed the Chinese Act limiting the number of Chinese immigrants on 11 June 1855, before even the first Constitution Bill passed the Victorian House of Commons. And, of course, the Immigration Restriction Act was quite famously the first major piece of legislation passed after Federation in 1901. As well as forced eviction from their lands, there have been numerous controls on Aboriginal people's movement in their own countries through Australia's history. This includes the exemption certificate system by which one could leave a reserve and access rights otherwise denied to Aboriginal people at the time, such as the right to own land or open a bank account, but in exchange was required to seek state permission before visiting family on reserves.

Border violence is central to colonial governments in Australia establishing and legitimating themselves, not least by promoting the notion of Australia as a single country and presenting the border as a natural geographic feature, formed by oceans and waters as Suvendrini Perera discusses. And, in fact, Australia's colonial past is brought up quite often in relation to border violence, for example in images of the First Fleet as 'boat people'. This imagery is important because the fear of invasion as retribution is a powerful motif in white Australian imagination, a motif that Meaghan Morris calls 'the chain of displacement'. Border violence is part of projecting the invader as outside and other, and functions as a concealment of European invasion.

But bringing up the colonial past can also normalise or nativise settler colonisation, and erase Indigenous subjectivity and

sovereignty in slogans like 'we are all boat people'. A focus on the moment of invasion or on the colonial past positions colonisation as history. It makes colonisation a done deal, to which the only sensible responses are regret and apology, or pride and forgetfulness – but Australia has a colonial present. The border is not a natural or inevitable thing and neither is colonisation.

Understanding colonisation as an ongoing and always incomplete process suggests a future that's open to change. It shifts the onus of explanation to those who want to create and maintain borders rather than those who want to question them. It challenges the myth that refugees are a breach in an otherwise secure border. And it reaches through to a space where white Australia is and can only ever be a fiction that is made material through violence.